The Evolution of Queer Coding in Disney

Disney has employed changing societal values since the 1930’s to maximize the profit of their children’s films through an evolving use of queer coding. Queer coding is the strategy of creating subtextually queer characters using “‘a set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages.’” (Greenhill 111). While film creators often deny any queerness of characters, the extent of careful deliberation and editing that films are subject to means that most of the content in a movie is intentional (112). Queer coding is often accomplished through use of allegory or stereotype, including behavior that can be described as camp, which is a culmination of incongruity, theatricality, and humor that has been “inextricably linked, through its history, with homosexuality” (Letts 150).

Although queer coding originated as a way of including or interpreting queer characters in films in spite of the Hays Production Code, which limited Hollywood film representation of sexuality from 1930-1968, the perpetuation of this practice has led to negative queer stereotyping, and more recently, queerbaiting (Noriega 35; Fraustino 132). Queerbaiting is a newer term that “refers to the perceived intentional practice of ‘baiting’ audiences with the promise of queer representation, through marketing, or subtextual hints and gestures, but ultimately failing to meet expectations” (McDermott 844). Queer coding and baiting occurs in a
wide variety of genres—including Marvel’s superhero action films (Piontek 686)—but this paper focuses specifically on its use in Disney’s animated films for children.

Disney’s queer representation is decidedly limited, likely because of their reputation as an “upstanding moral organization” (Griffin 3) that upholds values such as “American triumphalism, binaries of good and evil, the obviousness of heterosexuality, and the fundamental binary of gender” (St. Jacques 5). However, many queer-coded characters have been identified in literature, including Bambi (St. Jacques 12), Captain Hook (Brown 1), Maleficent, Cruella de Vil (Griffin 74), and Elsa (Vargová 67). Perhaps the most notable of the queer-coded characters are Disney villains from the 80’s and 90’s, including Ursula, Jafar, Scar, Governor Ratcliffe, and Hades (Letts 148). Despite the regular depiction of gender nonconforming and sexually ambiguous queer characters, the inherent linking of these traits, until quite recently, to villains serves to reinforce heteropatriarchal normativity, as characters “stand in contradistinction to and to reiterate heteropatriarchy, offering the ‘not’ to what it is and should be—heteronormativity” (154). More recently, queerbaiting has been identified in Frozen II (Vargová 73) and Luca (White par. 4), marking a new trend in Disney’s use of queer coding.

Despite little research on the influence that Disney’s queer coding has on child audiences, the existing literature suggests a few impacts. Macie Lee St. Jacques asserts that Disney characters can shape children’s identity development, citing Lacan’s mirror stage psychology (St. Jacques 4). Karin A. Martin and Emily Kazyak contend that Disney films contribute to children’s development of heteronormativity through magical and consistent portrayal of heterosexuality and heterosexiness (Martin, Karin A., and Emily Kazyak 315). According to a study on gender portrayal in Disney Princess films, “television has been identified as a dominant source of social influence on children’s gender concepts” (England et al. 556), which are closely
associated with the gender nonconformity of queer-coded characters. Furthermore, Michael McDermott argues that queerbaiting can have negative effects on LGBTQ+ viewers, by mirroring onscreen painful erasure and invisibility that many queer people experience in real life, as well as sending the message that romance and happiness are only possible for cishet individuals (McDermott 850). Although the impacts of queerbaiting were not considered specifically for children, it is reasonable to see how these impacts can affect queer youth as well as adults.

If Disney’s “monopolization of children’s entertainment” (St. Jacques 3) has the power to shape children’s identity development, heteronormativity, and belief in a happy, livable future through queer coding, it is exceptionally important to challenge its explicit—and perhaps more crucial, subtextual—representation of queerness in children’s films. However, there is no comprehensive analysis of how Disney’s use of queer coding has changed over time. This paper argues that Disney’s use of queer coding has evolved in response to societal pressures of the time by slowly incorporating more explicitly queer-coded characters—especially villains—into their children’s films, until more recently when it used coded protagonists to queer-bait audiences.

The Hays Production Code and moral expectations of the 1930’s gave birth to queer coding, although its use in Disney films was limited to timid, light-hearted entertainment for the first three decades. As Lisa Fraustino explains, “Given that the Motion Picture Production Code or ‘Hays Code’ in effect from 1930 to 1968 placed limits on overt portrayals of sexuality [...] in Hollywood films, the patterns found in the early Disney canon reflect cultural mores of the time” (Fraustino 132). While other movie genres began queer coding characters and storylines, Disney cultivated a reputation of being “an upstanding moral organization, committed to providing children with characters and narratives that would not unduly expose them to sex or violence”
(Griffin 3). It was important to the success of the company that parents trusted Disney to responsibly influence their children’s moral development (Brown 2). At the time, this meant that very little sexuality was represented, both heterosexual and homosexual, although the films still included hetero-romantic narratives.

Due to society’s expectation against sexuality in children’s films, much of Disney’s early queer coding was exclusively light-hearted gender nonconformity. Although there are exceptions, such as in Bambi (1942), in which the male protagonist exhibits feminine traits (St. Jacques 19), this gender nonconformity was typically reserved for villains. For example, although Captain Hook’s obsession with young boys in Peter Pan (1953) could be read as homosexual pedophilia, a trope that has been used historically to reinforce homophobia (White par. 21), his queerness is primarily implied by the femininity of his appearance, “complete with loose long hair, a flowing cape, a pink shirt, and a bushy feather in his hat” (Brown 3). Additionally, both Captain Hook and Honest John from Pinocchio (1940) use “cultured dandyism to hide their evil designs” (Griffin 76). Early female villains, such as Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty (1959) and Cruella de Vil in One Hundred and One Dalmatians (1961), display assertive drama, as Maleficent “moves with grand sweeps of her cape and long-flowing gown, and strikes magnificent ‘diva’-like poses,” and Cruella over-inflates her feminine glamour to the point of humor (Griffin 74). Each of these traits are used to entertain audiences, and to distinguish the villains from other characters. Ultimately, because of the company’s reputation and the perpetuation of the Hays Code until 1968, these characters are not sexual in any way, nor explicitly queer-coded. However, this marks the bashful beginning of Disney’s long-standing history of queer-coded villains, reinforcing gender norms by vilifying those who don’t conform.
By the late 1980’s, the tradition of queer-coded villains had grown to be more explicit, utilizing camp to entertain audiences while reinforcing the heteropatriarchy. Some of the most iconic examples include Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), who was designed after the drag queen Divine (Letts 153); Jafar in *Aladdin* (1992), who exhibits “sarcasm, queeny asides” (155); Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), whose “witty, acerbic quips and catty sensibility” (152) combines with his refusal to participate in the “Circle of Life” (155); Governor Ratcliffe in *Pocahontas* (1995), who exhibits feminine fashion and an “effeminate, fashionable persona” (154); and Hades in *Hercules* (1997), whose “sardonic quips” contribute to his camp (152). Each of these character’s queer traits are inextricably linked to their villainy. For example, in “showing Ursula, a masculine character, don a more feminine appearance for the purpose of evil connects crossdressing and drag with evil intentions” (Brown 7). In setting queer-coded “otherness” against the beautiful protagonist, heteronormativity is reinforced and even valorized (Letts 153–154). Furthermore, in using camp to portray the villain’s incongruity, Disney was able to profit from the entertainment of camp’s humor for straight audiences (155). Having reached a point of social acceptance in which characters could be connotatively queer, Disney upheld its moral standing by reinforcing heteronormativity, while still profiting off of the humor and entertainment offered by queer stereotypes.

In the rise of more widespread acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the 2010’s, Disney began extending its use of queer coding to protagonists, but the lack of proper representation has resulted in queer-baiting. The most prevalent example is the character Elsa in *Frozen* (2013) and *Frozen II* (2019). In addition to being one of few Disney princesses without a love interest, much of Elsa’s narrative is about being different, finding her true self, and struggling with her rejection from society. All of these are commonly associated with the queer
experience, allowing queer viewers to empathize with the princess. However, while Elsa is one of Disney’s first queer-coded protagonists, the queer-coded aspects of her character remain linked with villainy. In fact, developed after the antagonist in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen* (Vargová 12), Elsa was “initially written to be a typical Disney evil witch who would freeze her potential suitors, until she meets an ordinary man who melts her heart” (14). The characteristic which sets her apart, her ice powers, are portrayed in the film as “a source of danger to the straight characters in the film,” perpetuating Disney’s trend of vilifying queerness (Brown 10). In *Frozen II*, the publicity surrounding Elsa’s relationship with Honeymaren marks one of the company’s first uses of queerbaiting. The rise of queerbaiting in Disney’s films demonstrates the company’s desire to seem accepting of “progressive feminism and ‘heterosexual-inclusive’ ideologies, only to undermine and disavow them with a ‘bait and switch’ narrative maneuvering that undercut the film’s ostensible message” (St. Jacques 6).

Because of society’s divide, Disney has identified that there is a proud queer community that can be drawn in with the suggestion of queer content, but the company is only willing to represent queer characters to the extent that it “‘doesn’t damage its conservative image.’ (Maier)” (White par. 13). Thus, queerbaiting continues Disney’s trend of exploiting queer communities to maximize their profit.

Most recently, the 2021 film *Luca* exemplifies queerbaiting by imbedding “stereotypes and recognizable milestones in the history of the queer community and experience” (White par. 29) within a narrative about two young boys together in their self-discovery and search for freedom to be themselves. Although many viewers are self-proclaiming *Luca* as Disney’s first gay coming of age story, the queerness of protagonists Luca and Alberto are never explicitly conveyed in the film, and the film’s director Enrico Casarosa has denied any specifically queer
intentions for the characters, saying in an interview that it was “‘really more about friendships’” (Out Magazine par. 5). Though a missed opportunity for queer representation, this film does mark a shift in Disney’s use of queer coding, as the queer traits are exhibited by the protagonists, and are not portrayed as dangerous or to be feared. While the film continues a disappointing trend of exploitation through queerbaiting, perhaps Luca indicates the transition to positive queer representation in Disney’s animated children’s films. Undoubtedly, Luca will be central to future research on queer coding and baiting in Disney.

Because of Disney’s massive influence on children’s understanding of themselves and their world, the company has the power to perpetuate ignorance and fear, or bring about a new era of acceptance and embracing differences. Unfortunately, due to Disney’s ever-present goal to maximize profit, it has historically used that power to reinforce heteronormativity, even while it queerbait audiences in the LGBTQ+ community. Even as representation increases in other media and film genres, it remains remarkably absent in the monopoly of children’s films, and while Disney has progressed in its use of queer coding, it is ultimately not fulfilling the need for true representation. Queer children deserve characters who they can empathize and identify with, whose queerness is widely-known and embraced, so that they too can imagine a future of love and acceptance.
Work Cited


White, Ginger. *Cinema as Technology*. University of Washington, 2021,